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ABSTRACT

Some questions about feminist rhetoric would include the following. Should a speaker resist the phallocentric rhetoric of the academy by refusing, resisting or otherwise willfully choosing not to say, "Here are my points, Here are my conclusions, Here is my argument that I hope to persuade you to believe?" Should a speaker foster a discourse that is indirect, digressive, open, exploratory, responsive and interconnected as opposed to linear, closed, authoritative and objectively logical? Should that speaker try to feature his or her feelings as well as his or her criticism? But then what if the voice of authority or criticism dominates? Along these lines, how does the speaker construct a classroom environment and writing curriculum for underprepared composition students? How does he or she reconcile the seemingly conflicting claims of feminism (and other) researchers? For instance, while researchers such as P. Annas, J. Eichhorn et al, N. Schniedewind, and M. Woolbright (among legions of others) suggest that collaborative pedagogy and a shared-authority classroom enhance learning for female (and many male) students, how does the speaker reconcile that perspective with the findings of G. Jensen and J. DiTiberio, which suggest that introverts learn best when alone. Should the speaker take "authority" in the classroom? Should he or she adopt an authority-driven teaching method that changes students' preferred learning styles and challenge their gender identities? If language is a trap, if the master's language is oppressive, what then is the speaker to teach? (Contains 45 references.) (TB)

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ED 373 327

Some Questions for Feminist Rhetoric

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- *"[Sally Miller] Gerhart [in "The Womanization of Rhetoric"] indicts the discipline of rhetoric because of her belief that 'any intent to persuade is an act of violence' [195]. The intention to change others, she writes, embodies a 'conquest model of human interaction'" (Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, "Discourse and Diversity: Experimental Writing within the Academy" 363-64).*

- *"I would suggest that tentativeness, equivocation even, has a positive role to play in intellectual endeavor. . . . It is permissive, enabling, undefinitive. It opens up inquiry rather than shutting it down. It questions. It wonders. It invites others to do so as well" (Cathy Popkin, "A Plea to the Wielders of Academic Dis(of)course" 174).*

Perhaps unlike the other speakers in this session (though I dare not presume to speak for them), I do not consider myself to be an authority on feminist rhetoric. So why, you may legitimately wonder, am I here? Why do I take 15 minutes that could have been given to a recognized authority on this subject that you have come here to learn and converse about? If I offer you no conclusions to help you clarify the extraordinarily complex issues associated with the role of feminist forms of thinking and articulation within the phallogocentric academy that all of us teach, write, and live much of our lives within; if I

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refuse, or resist, or otherwise willfully choose NOT to say, "Here are my points, Here are my conclusions, Here is my argument that I hope to persuade you to believe?"--then what?

What would you do if I sang so out of tune, so to speak? Would you get up and . . . you know?

What if i take my title, "Some Questions for Feminist Rhetoric," rather literally and present my questions, along with ***some*** explanatory commentary, but not so much explanation that I begin to suggest that I have found answers that you also should feel compelled to accept? And why do I address my questions, overtly at least, to an abstraction--feminist rhetoric--rather than to feminists or rhetoricians or to the three speakers with whom I share time today? In addressing the concept of rhetoric instead of individuals, am I following a masculinist epistemology that values the making of abstractions out of subjects and the objective distancing of self from those subjects, thereby cutting off the possibility of inter-connectedness with ***actual*** people who have an investment in, and are even invested by, these ideas? On the other hand, were I to address my questions directly to real people, don't I run the risk of placing myself in an adversarial stance in relation to them, especially if my questions were to challenge their opinions or their gendered identities? If I choose to be heard but not to profess or coerce, what are my rhetorical options for this presentation?

There are some models already, aren't there, of feminist forms of discourse that foster indirect, digressive, open, exploratory, responsive, and interconnected discourse structures as opposed to linear, closed, authoritative, and objectively logical forms? For instance, what about Jane Tompkins's "Me and My Shadow"? Could not I also craft a discourse that breaks

through silence, that is open, non-linear, digressive, interpersonal, and exploratory, as are these opening paragraphs from Tompkins's article?

> There are two voices inside me answering, answering to, Ellen's essay. One is the voice of a critic who wants to correct a mistake in the essay's view of epistemology. The other is the voice of a person who wants to write about her feelings. (I have wanted to do this for a long time but have felt too embarrassed.) This person feels it is wrong to criticize the essay philosophically, and even beside the point, because a critique of the kind the critic has in mind only insulates academic discourse further from the issues that make feminism matter. That make *her* matter. The critic, meanwhile, believes such feelings, and the attitudes that inform them, are soft-minded, self-indulgent, and unprofessional.
>
> These beings exist separately but not apart. One writes for professional journals; the other in diaries, late at night. One uses words like "context" and "intelligibility," likes to win arguments, see her name in print, and give graduate students hardheaded advice. The other has hardly ever been heard from. She had a short story published once in a university literary magazine, but her works exist chiefly in notebooks and manila folders labelled "Journal" and "Private." This person talks on the telephone a lot to her friends, has seen psychiatrists, likes cappuccino, worries about the state of her soul. Her father is ill right now, and she has a friend who recently committed suicide. . . . (169)

I suppose, like Tompkins, I can be indirect and non-linear and maybe even non-judgmental, but how successful have I been thus far? How can I know unless you tell me? Can you tell me?

(If, as some feminist theorists suggest, language--at least academic language--IS phallogocentric and in its forms DOES silence many women, how can I know if what you can tell me is even what you actually think or believe? I hear the echo of Kathy Acker's description of her character Don Quixote, "BEING BORN INTO AND PART OF A MALE WORLD, SHE HAD NO SPEECH OF HER OWN" [58; qtd. in Sciolino 439], and I ask myself, What am I to believe about even the possibility of our speaking or writing the same language and, thus, about the probability of our connecting? And, being male, I wonder how I might be culpable for the silences I read about--and, of course, for those silences I never even hear--and how I might help to redeem or transform language that we all can share and speak and write.)

I ***could***, I suppose, attempt connection by writing in two voices also, but what if the voice of the critic or the authority were to dominate? Or I ***could***, perhaps, tell you about the pregnant and troubled newlywed friend I talk with on the telephone most nights or about the psychiatrists I have seen or about my friend who just recently attempted suicide, but why would I--why should I--bare those intimacies? (After all, we hardly know each other.)

(Being male, am I a victim--or perhaps just distant and oppressive, or both--because I, like many men, according to Carol Gilligan, see "danger . . . in close personal affiliation" [42]?)

Even if I did share those intimate details, would they help you to understand the questions I struggle with concerning the nature and efficacy of feminist rhetoric as a means of creating and giving voice to both lived and intellectual experiences? Is efficaciousness, in its concern with practicality and ends and products, an authority-driven, potentially oppressive concern? Is the question of relevance even relevant, given its potential for limiting the range and tenor of alternative voices and experiences? What are the degrees of separation between us, and how many must we break through to connect, to communicate? (Are they even the same for all of us?)

Should I address Tompkins as Jane?

(In my unwillingness to assert, do I appear confused, stupid, facetious, egalitarian, collaborative, voiceful, voiceless? Does it even matter, since I purposefully stop short of stating points and drawing conclusions? What is your role in constructing this discourse along with me?)

Perhaps most troubling to me is the question, How do I construct a classroom environment and writing curriculum for my underprepared composition students? How do I reconcile the seemingly conflicting claims of feminist (and other) researchers? For instance, while researchers such as Annas, Eichhorn et al., Schniedewind, and Woolbright (among legions of others) suggest that collaborative pedagogy and a shared-authority classroom enhance learning for female (and many male) students, how do I reconcile that perspective with the findings of other studies which suggest that collaborative learning can disadvantage some students who value other learning styles? What am I to make of the following caution,

voiced by Laurie Finke in "Knowledge as Bait: Feminism, Voice, and the Pedagogical Unconscious"?

> Students enter the classroom believing that the teacher knows the "right" answer; her refusal to reveal that answer--and feminist teachers quite often claim that they have no "right" answers--can and often does cause more distress than empowerment." (17-18)

A page later, Finke continues by suggesting that "This inequality--the student's position of ignorance and resistance, the teacher's of supposed knowledge and mastery--is the 'bait'" that draws students--and women most especially--to empowered, or at least potentially ***empowering***, learning (19). What do I make of Marcia Magolda's longitudinal study of Miami University students in college years 1 through 5, reported in her 1992 book, Knowing and Reasoning in College: Gender-Related Patterns in Students' Intellectual Development, which indicates that approximately 70% of first-year students (both male and female) are Absolute Knowers, who see their roles as learners to obtain knowledge from the instructor and who see the role of the instructor to communicate knowledge to students in understandable ways? What do I do with these Absolute Knowers who feel uncomfortable--even confused--when instructors relinquish their authoritative roles (even if these instructors are attempting to develop independent thinking among students)? At the same time, what do I do with the tiny handful of my at-risk students who may be Transitional Knowers and who may benefit from collaborative work and shared authority?

Furthermore, if Jensen and DiTiberi are correct in their article, "Personality and Individual Writing Processes," might not introverts, who "think best and develop ideas when alone, uninterrupted by people and events" (288), be disadvantaged by required collaboration, just as extraverts will welcome collaboration? And how do I value the learning styles of thinking types, who "prefer to make decisions on the basis of objective criteria [and] want to do what is right, even if feelings are hurt or group harmony is disrupted" (292-93), as well as value the learning styles of feeling types, who "prefer to make decisions on the basis of subjective factors, such as their personal values, the values of others involved, and the effect of the decision on group harmony" (293)? These types seem to bear strong similarities to masculinist and feminist methods of making and articulating meaning, don't they, so--again--how do I balance their learning styles in a single curriculum and classroom? In leading each student to what I hope would be more flexible styles of thinking, interacting, and writing, am I working in the service of assimilation, or accommodation, or resistance, or silence?

Finally, how do I reconcile the differing perspectives on feminist writing that I find in the following sample of perspectives?

- "As teachers of composition, [Cixous] argues, we must extend our definitions of effective writing in order to communicate a sense of possibility to the students alienated by established modes of discourse. We must allow women writers, in other words, to speak in foreign tongues." (Juncker, "Writing (with) Cixous" 431)

- "What troubles me the most is the basic, unexamined assumption that the best way to know things about literature and to help others know things about literature is by presenting a thesis and making a case for it by answering counterarguments." (Olivia Frey, "Beyond Literary Darwinism: Women's Voices and Critical Discourse" 507-08, 511)

- "Argument [as forms of negotiation and mediation] still has a place, although now as a means, not an end. The end--a resolution of conflict that is fair to both sides--is possible even in the apparent one-sidedness of written communication." (Catherine E. Lamb, "Beyond Argument in Feminist Composition" 11)

- "Female students clearly seem likely to have unique problems in thinking, focusing, and writing." (Margaret B. Pigott, "Sexist Roadblocks in Inventing, Focusing, and Writing" 927)

- "I suspect that one must first master the male mode of rhetoric before attempting the female mode, because the female mode requires an even greater degree of control than that required in the male mode. . . . Therefore, I advocate that students in college composition courses be required to master the male mode of rhetoric. Furthermore, I suspect that the female mode can be learned but cannot be taught." (Thomas J. Farrell, "The Female and Male Modes of Rhetoric" 920)

- "We do not suggest that women's language be 'corrected' or that subjective world views be criticized. . . . Also, basic writing instruction should help female students learn to coexist with the often alienating linguistic expectations of the academy without upholding the characteristics of language produced by males as the preferred paradigm" (Paul Hunter et al., "Competing Epistemologies and Female Basic Writers" 80).

Do you see in these comments something of my dilemma, my uncertainty?

Why don't I just take a stand, explaining to students that certain forms of discourse and certain authority-driven teaching methods have marginalized and disadvantaged members of certain classes, ethnicities, and genders? (Would you believe I have tried, and sometimes succeeded--perhaps?) Can I, should I, take responsibility and **AUTHORITY** for attempting to change students' preferred learning styles and challenging their gendered identities? If language is a trap--if the master's language is oppressive not only of voice but of patterns of thinking and of constructing reality; if, as Keith Fort says. our ideas are determined by available discourse forms (174)--what, then, am I to teach? What dare I teach? Rebellion, as Fort implies? Understanding and connection and "attentive love," as Sara Ruddick and Catherine Lamb suggest? The male mode of rhetoric, as Thomas Farrell suggests? The power to express rage, as some of Phyllis Lassner's students suggest in speaking of their discomfort with Rogerian argument? What, then, finally constitutes the purpose and identity of the composition classroom?

You don't really expect an answer from ***me***, now do you?

But I will sit with you now, as we continue to listen, together.

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